Lucia A Keegan 11/07/2006 03:02:15 PM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007256

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FROM USMISSION UNESCO PARIS

FOR ECA/A - MARYANNE CRAVEN AND TOM FARRELL
FOR USAID - JOE CARNEY AND BUFF MACKENZIE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: UNESCO SCUL
SUBJECT: UNESCO - PILOT PORTAL PROJECT PROPOSAL ON RECOGNIZED HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

¶1. Summary. On November 13-14, 2006, UNESCO is hosting a meeting of
the pilot project steering committee for the UNESCO portal on
recognized higher education institutions. Judith Eaton, President
of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, is the designated
US steering committee member. This portal pilot project idea came
out of discussions during the UNESCO/OECD cross-border higher
education guidelines negotiations, which led to the issuance of the
non-binding guidelines by the two bodies last year. End Summary.

¶2. During the guidelines negotiations, the U.S. successfully argued
to de-link the information project from the guidelines document
itself, and also that any information project to support the
guidelines' implementation and goals should consist only of a simple
portal limited to a website link, which would direct users to the
information on recognized higher education institutions created by
national authorities within their countries. During the guidelines
negotiations, the U.S. informally offered to participate in the
pilot portal project as one of the pilot countries, in part so that
we could maintain involvement in its development. The USG also
believes that it is important to have a mix of countries in the
pilot, including some with highly developed higher education and
accreditation systems, as well as countries that need assistance in
that area. State's ECA Bureau is looking into possibilities for
providing modest funding and/or advice by U.S. experts for the pilot
project, so that we have a defined role as a stakeholder and also to
demonstrate our support for capacity building in this area.

¶3. The USG and others, mainly Australia and Great Britain, opposed
efforts during the guidelines negotiations for a UNESCO created and
controlled database that could potentially supersede national
authorities in determining quality standards for higher education as
well as being very expensive, and virtually impossible to maintain
as accurate.

¶4. OECD input: The OECD has largely allowed UNESCO to take the lead on future steps for the Guidelines. The United States has made it clear that formal implementation of the Guidelines was never agreed upon, but was willing to allow for a portal that simply redirected users to appropriate national authorities. At an OECD Ministerial on Higher Education in Athens, Greece this past June, an international education scheme was supported by several countries, particularly in Europe, as the future for higher education. U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings was quick to explain that

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the basis of the U.S. higher education system is so vastly different than the rest of the world, that such a system would not be effective in the United States.

¶5. Last summer, during a meeting of the steering committee, the committee asked UNESCO to reduce the cost of this proposal to fully reflect the concept of a narrow informational portal rather than an expansive database. However, the current draft portal proposal does not reflect that request. The UNESCO proposal requests over $400,000 to fund the project, although one UNESCO higher education official has indicated that they are not seeking the whole amount in monetary contributions, and could accept technical or in-kind assistance as a portion of the support.

¶6. In addition, no agreement was reached on the number of pilot projects that would be funded or that African countries would receive priority, as outlined in the agenda for the November meeting. Concerns have been expressed that this approach by UNESCO takes decision-making authority away from nations that volunteered to participate in the pilot, including the US, and transfers it to the Secretariat. This could lead to inclusion of countries in the pilot that have no capacity to contribute either financially or technically, and which may produce a wish list of what they would want in a major database rather than using the model of a simple portal.   In addition, phrases in the draft proposal provided for the meeting, such as "structured access", and "protecting students from misleading guidance and information, rogue providers, and qualifications of limited validity" also raise concerns for the USG.
 Such terminology suggests that the Secretariat may wish to decide what is "misleading guidance" and who are "rogue providers" in a centrally prepared list of institutions, rather than having the agreed-upon simple informational portal that links to national sites controlled by each country's national education authorities (whether governmental or non-governmental.) The latter structure would allow users to make their own decisions regarding educational providers based on the information provided by national authorities.

¶7. In order to ensure that this portal remains only informational and does not become a UNESCO controlled database, the USG may have to intervene at this steering committee meeting to make those points. The USG should also reinforce the point that results from the pilot project for the portal should be gathered and assessed, before any effort is made to expand this activity beyond the initial pilot.

¶8. In addition, the USG could consider providing targeted support to the pilot portal initiative, which would give us a degree of "ownership" in the process, more information and control, and would also demonstrate our support for capacity building in this area. This could be accomplished either through actual dollars or in-kind support or both. In addition, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) has also offered $10,000 to UNESCO for this project. We understand that UNESCO initially expressed reluctance to accept non-governmental funding for this activity, but we might want to encourage UNESCO to reconsider that position. In addition, UNESCO may be open to accepting expert assistance as a form of support for this activity. Perhaps ECA and the Mission could offer the assistance of a Fulbright senior specialist, or a US Speaker (arranged by IIP or directly by our posts under the speaker program) to consult either at UNESCO, or in one or more of the pilot countries for this project, to help them develop or improve their higher education information systems in-country.

¶9. Also, having the USAID global learning portal provide a technological "home" for the portal activity, if this is feasible, is another opportunity to have more control over this project and

reduce its costs. We would need to explore this with USAID and with UNESCO. Finally, CHEA has also offered to advise and consult informally on this project, as an "in-kind" contribution and perhaps other U.S. higher education and accreditation associations would be willing to advise as well.

¶10. The USG needs to closely monitor how this pilot project is developed so that it is constituted as a simple informational portal for users to access higher education information created by national authorities rather than a major new central database. Expansion of this project beyond a portal could result in UNESCO attempting to dictate what constitutes a quality higher educational institution, thus superseding national authority and even leading to international regulation of higher education institutions, which the USG strongly opposes. Given the comments made during the Francophonie meeting this summer that education should not be a "commercial good," have raised our concerns about the possibility of efforts being made to remove education from world trade rules and the potential for development of a convention or similar instrument to "protect" education, similar to the UNESCO convention protecting cultural diversity. For these reasons, it is a high priority for the USG to monitor the portal project and work, as we did with the guidelines themselves, to shape it into an acceptable form.
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